



Fighting Racial Violence in Kentucky: The Anti-Lynching Movement, 1890-1930

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Introduction

Almost immediately after the Civil War, Kentucky became a state that struggled with racial violence, specifically lynching. This violence was not new to the state, nor was it new to any state in the South, but after the war, this violence drastically increased.¹ The extent of racial violence in Kentucky was matched only by that in the Deep South. The aftermath of the Civil War left Kentucky with more in common with the ex-Confederate states than the pro-Union states it had chosen to fight with.² In order to combat the racial violence that was becoming a prevalent part of Kentucky life, new organizations formed to protest lynchings and convince the state legislature to pass anti-lynching laws as well as laws to end the inequality being experienced by African Americans. The most prominent organization, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was organized in 1909. Louisville, Kentucky joined the NAACP soon after its creation and during the anti-lynching movement. William English Walling of Louisville, Kentucky joined with Mary White Ovington and Henry Moskowitz to form the Kentucky branch of the NAACP. Louisville was the place of some of the NAACP's most important victories and played a key role in the acceptance of the anti-lynching law of 1920 in Kentucky.³ The NAACP successfully ended lynching and lessened racial violence in Kentucky by educating the public, utilizing the press, and encouraging state legislators to pass laws against lynching.



http://4.bp.blogspot.com/zsK9qQYle5w/UyXN0TX1rwI/AAAAAAAIy8Jm_GgG6IHmf/s1600/The+lynching+of+Thomas+Shipp+and+Abram+Smith,+Marion,+Indiana,+1930.jpg

Education

African Americans and whites used lynching to influence education in different, contradictory, ways. The white population that participated in racial violence used lynching to prevent African Americans from becoming educated and taking their place in society as equals. The African American population used education to end lynching.⁴ The NAACP knew the power of education and used it to ensure that people in the United States knew about lynching and the real reasons it was being done. Many white newspapers would make lynchings and other racial violence seem justified because of the horrendous crimes committed by the individual being targeted. The NAACP used education to show the public that the real reason behind racial violence was fear of African Americans rising in social, political, and economic class. Lynching was used as a way to prevent African Americans from becoming equal.⁵ The NAACP used churches, schools, and the press to educate the United States about lynching.



<http://images.metmuseum.org/CRDImages/ph/original/DP283445.jpg>

KENTUCKY CHIEF SIGNS ANTI-LYNCHING LAW

NEW YORK CITY, April 14.—The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People makes the following statement regarding the signing, by the governor of Kentucky of a bill to punish mob violence:

In view of the lynching on March 2 of Grant Smith, a Negro, at Millersburg, Kentucky, by a mob which overpowered the sheriff and the police chief so they were taking their prisoner to jail, it is interesting to note that only one week prior to this occurrence Governor Edwin P. Morrow of Kentucky signed a bill providing for the punishment of lynchers and for the removal of the peace officer who harbored his prisoner. The bill was signed in the presence of a committee of Colored citizens headed by Dr. E. E. Underwood, president of the Frankfort Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, in whom the gold pin used by the governor was presented.

Death Penalty for Lynchers.
The bill makes the penalty for lynching death or life imprisonment, and that for attempted lynching confinement in the penitentiary for not less than two years nor more than twenty-one years.

The fight to secure a lynching law in Kentucky began with the legislature of two years ago, when a bill was passed prohibiting the people a con-

stitutional amendment to make it possible to effect the automatic removal of any peace officer who permitted a mob to secure a prisoner in his custody. The bill submitting the amendment was championed by a committee of Colored citizens, who succeeded in securing its passage without a single dissenting vote in either branch of the legislature.

Not Effective in Smith Case.
The Association has learned that the anti-lynching statute does not become operative until 30 days after the adjournment of the legislature due to its failure to include an emergency clause. It, therefore, can not be enforced by Kentucky authorities to bring to trial the lynchers of Grant Smith on March 2.

http://dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam/images/Newsaper/Advocate/Vol06/num49/01_08/01_08.gif

The Press

The first reports of lynchings and mob violence in Kentucky generally portrayed the lynch mob's target as deserving of the "punishment" being inflicted on them. Any newspaper, whether owned by a black or white individual, was subject to racial violence if it presented any other view of lynching other than it being justice.⁶ For African American publishers, it was especially hard to get the word out about the fight against lynching because of the limited number of people that read their newspapers.⁷ The NAACP recognized this issue and planned their events in places that would convince the white press to print stories about what they were doing. Although the white newspapers were not likely to portray the NAACP in a favorable light, they were still spreading the word about what they were doing.⁸ The actions of people protesting in the anti-lynching movement slowly spread throughout the country, making people more aware of the issue. After gaining more recognition and support, the NAACP was allowed to have their own press releases published in newspapers.⁹ The NAACP's effect use of the press allowed them to make people around the country aware of the issue and gain support. When northern states were exposed to the racial violence occurring in Kentucky, they were shocked. Kentucky's decision to continuously allow members of lynch mobs to go unpunished made people have a negative opinion of the state.¹⁰ This growing negative opinion would soon influence Kentucky's anti-lynching legislature.

Legal and Political Work

After the Civil War, many African Americans supported the Republican Party. The Republicans not only created the constitutional amendments that freed them and gave them rights, but also tried to help African Americans and whites adjust to living with one another as equals. The support of blacks was important to the Republican Party in order to win elections and pass legislation. The party's need for support allowed African Americans to at least say that they were opposed to lynching. For years, Republicans simply made statements without the actions to follow up their claims.¹¹ African Americans became frustrated with the lack of actions against racial violence and turned to state governments. The NAACP worked with local governments in Kentucky to try to convince them to punish those people responsible for lynchings and other acts of racial violence. For years, many local and state governments refused to do so. However, with the negative image of Kentucky in the press continuing to grow, the NAACP was able to get the Anti-Lynching Law of 1920 passed in Kentucky.¹²



<http://homelink.cpsk12.org/teachers/sweneb/images/BDC3E39F631F4364B7543FB2F1763B78.jpg>

Conclusion

The NAACP's work in Kentucky undoubtedly influenced the way lynchings were portrayed in the press as well as how the perpetrators were dealt with. Without the NAACP's work to end lynchings and lessen racial violence, such crimes would have gone unpunished and possibly have become more frequent. Although the organization did not end racism in Kentucky's society, they helped ensure that African Americans were protected from lawless justice. At the time, this was a big step towards equality. The NAACP would not stop with the anti-lynching movement though, they continued on to fight for social, political and economic equality for African Americans.